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Germany, U.S. sign Holocaust accord

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The U.S. and German governments yesterday signed a joint agreement to preserve Holocaust sites in Germany.

"The sites serve as a reminder of the atrocities committed by the Nazi dictatorship, something we must never forget and will not forget," German Ambassador H.E. Wolfgang Ischinger said at the signing ceremony in the Indian Treaty Room of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

The agreement was negotiated by the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad and was signed for the United States by Warren L. Miller, commission chairman.

The agreement outlines the commitment of the two countries to preserve cultural sites including cemeteries, houses of worship and other "places of commemoration." It also emphasizes the two nations' determination to prevent every form of prejudice or discrimination against any national, ethnic or religious group.

While the two governments have long been informally cooperating in issues of cultural preservation, yesterday marked the first formal agreement.

"The vast majority of the people of Germany were not alive during the Holocaust. They do not bear responsibility for what happened. But they do bear responsibility to confront the past and remember it truthfully and accurately," Mr. Miller said.

The commission has signed bilateral agreements to preserve cultural properties with 12 other countries throughout Eastern and Central Europe, including the former Soviet Baltic states, Ukraine and the Czech Republic. A similar agreement is expected with Poland in the coming months, Mr. Miller said.

Mr. Miller said it is essential for the United States to preserve Holocaust sites in Germany as part of U.S. history because "we are a nation of immigrants" and a large percentage of Americans view the Holocaust as part of their heritage.

The campaign to create the commission to preserve Jewish cemeteries, monuments and other holy sites throughout the world, which Congress founded in 1979, was led by Zvi Kestenbaum, a Brooklyn, N.Y., rabbi and a Holocaust survivor.

"Any nation that cares about a free and democratic future has to be honest about its past," said Sara Bloomfield, director of the United States Holocaust Museum, who attended yesterday's ceremonies. "Germany has done a lot to confront its history."

Mrs. Bloomfield said that while many people think that preservation is about the past, it is really about the future.

"They can preserve an understanding of World War II and the Holocaust for the next generation," Mrs. Bloomfield said.

"We want to ensure that future generations understand and accept their responsibility," said Mr. Ischinger, the German ambassador, "to ensure such atrocities can never happen again."